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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS, EUR/ERA, EUR/SE AND INR/EU

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SUBJECT: EU/TURKEY: AUSTRIANS SHARPEN CRITICISM, BUT
HOLD TO OCTOBER 3 START FOR TALKS

REF: Vienna 1969 (and previous)

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Austrian attitudes are hardening on Turkey's prospects for EU accession. Polls show only ten percent of Austrians support Turkish entry. In recent statements, leaders across the spectrum have voiced increasing skepticism regarding Turkish EU membership. Finance Minister Grasser told the Financial Times on July 18 that EU membership for Balkan aspirants should have priority over Turkish ambitions. Foreign Minister Plassnik suggested holding an extraordinary EU Council on Turkish entry. Joerg Haider, chairman of the junior coalition party BZO, called for a halt to EU expansion (including delaying the 2007 accessions of Romania and Bulgaria). The Turkish statement of July 29 that its signing of the EU customs union protocol did not amount to recognition of the Republic of Cyprus elicited sharp criticism. Vice Chancellor Gorbach (BZO) said that negotiations should not begin until Turkey recognizes Cyprus. Opposition parties SPO and FPO expressed similar views. Chancellor Schuessel, in an August 1 interview with the German newsweekly "Der Spiegel," said that the EU must take account of its own "absorptive capacity," and reiterated that negotiations should consider alternatives to full membership. End summary.

FM Plassnik Proposes Extraordinary EU Council

2. (SBU) Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik told the daily "Kurier" on July 25 that, given the skepticism towards Turkish EU membership within most European countries, the EU Commission's draft mandate for accession negotiations should contain more robust language on "open-endedness," including "the option of an alternative to membership." In her view, the mandate should also take account of the EU's "absorptive capacity as a condition for membership." In the interview, Plassnik deplored an apparent "tacit agreement not to debate the substance" at the July 18 GAERC, noting that the informal Foreign Ministers meeting in Newport in early September would only address the Turkish question on the margins. She suggested convening an extraordinary GAERC prior to October 3 to refine the Commission's negotiating mandate.

Finance Minister Argues Against Turkish Membership

3. (SBU) Previously, in a July 18 interview in the Financial Times, Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser said he favored putting aside full Turkish EU membership in favor of bringing Croatia "and other Balkan states" into the union. Grasser's blunt statement generated little response from his ministerial colleagues. FM Plassnik merely noted that October 3 remained the date for starting accession talks with Ankara.

Coalition Partner Says It Wants To Halt EU Expansion

4. (SBU) On July 25, Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider and Vice-Chancellor Hubert Gorbach, leaders of the junior coalition party "Alliance Future Austria" (BZO), called for an "immediate stop to EU expansion and related negotiations," and an increased focus on fighting unemployment and reforming Austria's economy instead. (Until now, Haider, much to the bewilderment of his own party and popular opinion, had been a stalwart advocate of Turkish EU membership.) Chancellor Schuessel countered that the EU had agreed on a procedure for accession talks which included a perspective that negotiations with Ankara would be open-ended.

BZO, SPO, FPO harden stances against Turkish entry

5. Predictably, Turkey's July 29 statement that its signing of an EU customs protocol did not constitute recognition of Cyprus also elicited a spate of Turkey-

critical comments from various political camps. On July 31, both the Social Democrats (SPO) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPO) took issue with Turkey's statement. Vice Chancellor Gorbach (BZO) said that entry talks with Ankara should not begin until Turkey recognizes Cyprus. Austria's Greens, generally sympathetic to Turkish EU accession, also expressed disappointment over Ankara's statement. Austrian President Fischer said Austria must approach the question of expansion, including Turkish accession, carefully and responsibly, but that the EU must honor its agreements with applicant countries.

Schuessel reiterates conditions for Turkish EU membership

16. (SBU) In recent press interviews, Schuessel has supported EU membership for Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, but warned against the costs associated with taking in Turkey. Schuessel confirmed that he is holding to the October 3 start date for negotiations, reiterating his conditions: that Turkish accession not overstrain the EU's "absorptive capacity" (read: finances); that negotiations be open-ended; and that the EU and Turkey consider alternatives to full membership. Schuessel said that the EU would also need "other partnership models" for Ukraine, Belarus, and the Mediterranean region.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The GOT statement on non-recognition of Cyprus played into the hands of the Turkey skeptics. Led by public opinion, politicians of all stripes are increasingly ready to ventilate criticism of possible Turkish entry. The London bombings jolted the Austrian public. Then, inflammatory press statements by a small coterie of radical imams set off an overheated debate about the role of Muslims in Austrian society. While no one has yet made a direct connection to the question of Turkey's EU prospects and these negative developments, they have served to undermine the basis for a reasoned discussion on the merits of Turkey's EU aspirations.

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